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Research will investigate how we make our air safer for everyone

In recognition of its world class expertise in environmental health, the University of Tasmania's Menzies Institute for Medical Research has received \$2.5 million from the National Health and Medical Research Council to establish a Centre for Safe Air.

The funding reflects the calibre of research that Tasmania can contribute to the world, in this case by investigating air safety issues that affect us all and that are increasingly urgent in the face of climate change and the ongoing pandemic.

Issues relating to the quality of the air we breathe have been pushed to the forefront in recent years, with escalating bushfire smoke impacts, extreme weather events including epidemic thunderstorm asthma, and links between air quality and infectious diseases such as COVID-19, all highlighting the importance of safe air.

The Centre will establish state-of-the-art ways to measure and map airborne hazards like air pollution and pollen, identify practical and cost-effective ways to improve the air, and provide robust evidence on interventions to protect those who are most vulnerable when air quality changes.

Professor Fay Johnston, who will lead the new Centre, said air quality plays a fundamental role in our current and future health.

"The simple truth is that the quality of the air that we all breathe has significant consequences. Around half the population are at higher risk from harm from air pollution, including those who are younger or older, pregnant, living with a chronic illness or experiencing social disadvantage.

"A conservative estimate for the economic costs of premature deaths, increased demands on health services and lost productivity as a result of poor air quality is \$10 billion a year in Australia.

"Many of our everyday activities have direct impacts on our personal health, our local environment and community health – winter woodsmoke being a good example of this.

"Small improvements in air quality translate into big improvements and cost savings in community health."

The Director of the Menzies Institute, Distinguished Professor Alison Venn said the Centre for Safe Air would draw together the many different players whose combined expertise is crucial to formulating solutions.

“The expertise needed for community health protection is diverse. It includes environmental, atmospheric, social and health sciences and strong collaborations with all stakeholder groups in the community. Like the existing systems for food and water safety, there is a need for a better integrated approach for managing air.”

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